

# THE YOUTH TRANSITIONS STUDY **FINAL REPORT** SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

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Pathways to Resilience and  
Youth Transitions Research



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# SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

## THE RESEARCH

### Background

While in general terms youth in Aotearoa New Zealand make a relatively successful transition into adulthood, a subsection of the youth population experience fragile and precarious journeys and uncertain outcomes. These youth are not a random group, they are often known to the systems mandated to support and educate them. Typically they have exited school early and many service systems will have been involved in their lives. Often these interventions have little positive impact. Despite the institutional knowledge of the risks and challenges these youth are likely to confront as they move into adulthood, they often face this transition alone. Sometimes services disrupt a process of deterioration and young people's circumstances improve, but at other times interventions exacerbate the challenges youth face. Overall professional intervention in the lives of these youth does not consistently create a pathway to better outcomes. This raises two questions which the study addresses:

Research questions:

1. When young people come into adolescence at a serious disadvantage, what factors make the most difference to their capacity to make a successful transition? and,
2. How can systems and the professionals working within them best respond to the challenges these youth face?

The research has a particular focus on understanding young people's experiences of education, transitions to employment and service delivery over time.

### Method

The study used a mixed methods design involving a sequential design of nested samples. It began with a national sample of 593 youth vulnerable to poor outcomes, and a comparison sample of 593 youth who were not vulnerable. The study comprised four linked components:

1. A survey administered three times at approximately annual intervals to 593 youth in the vulnerable group of youth who were aged between 12 and 17 years at the time of the first administration;
2. A survey administered once to a comparison group of 593 youth who were aged between 12 and 17 years, and who provided a baseline for comparison purposes and were recruited from the same neighbourhoods as the vulnerable group;
3. Qualitative interviews with a subset of the 107 vulnerable group youth completed three times at approximately annual intervals following the last survey;
4. Qualitative interviews administered three times at approximately annual intervals with a subset of adults nominated by vulnerable group youth as knowing the most about them (PMK, or person most knowledgeable).

The vulnerable group were selected based on the following criteria:

- a) their involvement as clients in the following service systems: mental health, juvenile justice, child welfare and educational systems (other than participation in mainstream classrooms), during the six months prior to participating in the study and
- b) their exposure to elevated risks during childhood. In the context of this study, elevated risks were defined as a history of exposure to atypical levels of adversity and trauma during childhood/early adolescence. This included high levels of exposure to harm from family, community, and/or school, presenting with challenging behaviours, involvement with major service systems (justice, welfare, mental health, or alternative education), living independently while still a minor or being homeless.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE

### Accelerated and compressed transitions

Self-reliance was a prominent feature of the lives of the vulnerable group. Unlike the comparison group, their circumstances meant that they had learned to cope on their own from a young age. When children have to grow up quickly and take on adult responsibilities at a young age, their transitions to adulthood are accelerated. These caring responsibilities also result in compressed childhoods because caring duties take from children the opportunities to have normative childhood experiences. The childhoods of the vulnerable group were characterised by these types of accelerated transitions to autonomy and compressed childhoods. The consequences of compressed childhoods and accelerated autonomy transitions are that young people become very skilled at making do, they learn to make the most of scarce resources and to manage their challenging circumstances on their own.

The strong sense of independence they developed as a result of these early experiences was protective in that the youth knew how to generate money and find shelter on their own. However, it also exposed them to many risks; their strategies typically comprised pathways into offending and made them vulnerable to exploitation. When things went wrong their default coping strategies were more likely to intensify the risks they faced than protect them.

The vulnerable group youth faced more challenges and had fewer resources than comparison group youth to assist them with the transition through adolescence:

### Living arrangements

- more lived in non whānau/family situations
- fewer lived with one or both birth parents
- more had lived rough in the previous year
- they came from larger families/ whanau
- they lived in smaller dwellings.

### Social and emotional resources

- were more likely to identify a non-parent relative as their parent figure
- were more likely to nominate a non-familial adult as acting in a parent role
- reported less affection from parent and caregiving figures
- reported higher rates of intimate relationships
- some were already parents, no comparison group youth were.

### Education, vulnerable group youth

- were less likely to be enrolled in some form of education, and to be enrolled in a mainstream school
- on average had attended more schools
- most had stopped attending a mainstream school by the first interview
- were less likely to be enrolled in school-based qualifications and to have achieved age-normative school qualifications
- were less likely to report that they felt a sense of belonging at school
- were more likely to be punished harshly by school and to be held back
- were more likely to have removed themselves from school, and been unable to attend school due to circumstances beyond their control.

### Risks and Resilience, vulnerable group youth

- reported far greater exposure to risks – both individual risks (conduct problems, delinquency, depression, health risks, peer problems) and contextual risks (family, school and neighbourhood)
- reported less resilience
- over time, youth resilience levels increased somewhat, their individual risk behaviours reduced significantly but their contextual risks remained relatively unchanged
- resilience status was the strongest predictor of positive outcomes.

## EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATION

- Most of the youth were under the mandated age at the time of the first survey, but only a minority were still attending a mainstream school
- Two thirds were still on track with their education at the first survey but by the third survey youth had lost a significant amount of ground. In particular, Māori youth, older and male youth reported the most significant rates of deterioration in their educational pathway
- The majority of youth reported that they felt alienated from and rejected by mainstream schools. Many reported victimisation by staff and other students and felt judged and blamed for their circumstances
- A third had stopped attending mainstream school by year 9
- Despite high levels of involvement, none of the interventions from welfare, justice, mental health and educational programmes were able to stop this deterioration
- Harsh disciplinary practices by schools were the strongest predictors of poor educational outcomes
- It appeared that rather than supporting vulnerable youth to stay engaged in education mainstream schools push these youth away and into the prison system because there was a direct and significant link between harsh disciplinary practices by mainstream schools and later criminal justice system involvement
- However, for a minority of youth school was a refuge from the stresses and risks they faced at home and in their neighbourhoods
- A sense of belonging at school and a positive peer group together predicted better educational outcomes and increased the likelihood that youth would remain in mainstream classrooms
- Through their policies and their daily practices, schools can provoke defiance and resistance in youth, or they can create enabling and encouraging environments that enable vulnerable students to participate
- When school staff knew about the challenges the young people faced at home and in their neighbourhoods, and took account of this in their interactions, young people said they found it easier to stay at school
- Actions that made a difference for young people were often simple acts of kindness and respect.

## EXPERIENCES OF EMPLOYMENT

- The young people articulated a powerful desire to have secure, legitimate work and to be financially independent; the need for work was a strong theme in interviews
- The young people believed that lack of educational credentials restricted their chances of finding work. However, the data did not indicate that educational credentials helped youth to secure work
- Just under a quarter of youth had worked in the past year at the third survey; a significant increase over the previous two surveys. A third remained unemployed at this time. The young people thus had much lower rates of workforce engagement than the general population of youth
- Most youth therefore needed to rely on some form of government assistance
- Formal systems were less effective in helping youth to secure work than personal networks. Cold calling was the least effective strategy. Luck played a prominent role.
- In addition, early exposure to work and the accumulation of employment skills helped youth to find work
- The jobs the young people found were often insecure, were all subject to the 90-day trial and many reported being exploited or required to do unsafe tasks
- When in employment therefore, young people felt vulnerable, when not in work they reported high levels of stress and anxiety because they typically did not have family/whānau to rely upon when they were without work



- WINZ (the state income support agency) was a common source of stress for the young people. In the qualitative interviews, five young people reported positive interactions with WINZ the remainder reported difficulties. These included, stress caused by procedural errors within WINZ offices and conflicting advice from staff, misleading information and miscommunication, the impact of stand-downs that were arbitrarily and unreasonably applied, humiliating, judgemental and punitive interactions. Young people also reported WINZ attributing significant debts to them without their knowledge. As a result they were reluctant to seek assistance and often resorted to offending to generate income and to manage the anxieties created by their precarious circumstances
- Youth sought assistance from other agencies as well. Private for hire labour firms were not a reliable source of employment. NGO providers were more helpful. The ecological support provided by the Youth Transitions Services were the most helpful. However, towards the end of the research the mandate of these services was changed, resulting in a much narrower focus which undermined the support that was able to be provided to young people
- In the final interview, many youth talked about feeling trapped by the income support and justice systems and unable to escape because of debts and requirements that they could not comply with. They were desperate for regular, reliable work as a way out of their situations.

## THE ROLE OF SERVICES IN CHANGE

- Better quality services – measured using a relational measure of service quality – the YSS-13 – were linked to better longer-term outcomes. This was a direct positive impact and was independent of the risks youth faced in their lives and the positive resources around them
- Youth who received two quality services reported better outcomes than youth who experienced inconsistent quality of services, and those who received two poor interventions
- Youth reporting two quality services also reported better resilience and less risk than youth reporting inconsistent or negative service experiences suggesting a need for all service providers to adopt positive relational practices in their work with vulnerable youth
- Youth with the highest risks had the most services involved in their lives, but this greater volume of services did not lead to better outcomes
- Youth with the highest individual risks were the least likely to receive high quality services
- Quality services did help to reduce contextual risks (family, community, school) but the greater volume of services these youth received cancelled out these benefits
- Practices that were particularly effective in supporting youth to change featured:
  - Respectful communication that was open, inclusive, and that actively encouraged and supported youth agency
  - Consistency and continuity so that young people knew what was happening and why and had confidence that their worker would stay with them
- Practitioners who built a sound understanding of the young person's circumstances and the pressures on them delivered more effective interventions. This required that they:
  - Demonstrate a respectful understanding of the young person's culture and context
  - Understand why the young person might be hesitant or resistant to service involvement and work positively with the young person to harness resistance as a positive resource
  - Recognise the underlying causes of behaviours and understand the impact that shame can have on young people's behaviours. Given this, successful interventions featured:
    - Appropriate demonstrations of love and care
    - Respect
    - Multi-layered interventions that addressed the material, physical and emotional needs of the young person.



# PARTH PRACTICES AND BETTER OUTCOMES FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH

The practices that were the most effective in supporting youth to make sustainable positive change are summarised under the acronym PARTH:



## Passion, Perseverance / Persistence, Perspective

- Young people know when workers ‘go through the motions’, they also know when a worker enjoys working with them and is committed to doing their best for them. Passion helps workers to persevere and persist and to see beneath the labels.
- Perseverance and persistence. Long-term unconditional commitment counteracts disrupted attachments, fractured relationships, emotional distress and exposure to harm. It compensates for practical and emotional supports that are missing. It means that workers will stay through difficult times. The focus is on understanding how risk and resilience shape young people’s experiences and behaviours - the ‘whole person’ and their context. This means workers need to listen carefully to the young person and respond to practical (e.g. housing, food, education etc.) and emotional needs.
- Perspective highlights the importance of positive youth development and strengths approaches. It emphasises collaborative partnerships with other practitioners and the central focus is on the needs of the young person at all times.

## Adaptability, Agency, Action Orientation

- Adaptable and agile interventions respond to the unique needs of each young person. Practitioners adjust their interactions with young people, look for alternatives and reflect on what they are doing. Reflective and adaptable practice responds to the changing needs of the young person. They involve a mix of interventions both short and long term, practical and emotional. They facilitate a seamless pathway through services for these young people, including re-engagement with services when required.
- Agency keeps young people at the centre of interventions. It calls for practices that open up opportunities for young people to test out their skills. It supports young people to learn how to make decisions and choices through trial and error. It provides an enduring and safe presence for youth as they try out new activities and as they learn to make positive decisions. It supports young people to exercise autonomy in safe ways.
- Practice is action-oriented which involves practitioners working in partnership with young people in solution finding. Practitioners make positive things happen for young people. Practical support is as valuable as emotional and therapeutic support. Practitioners ensure that assessments lead to delivery of services and to meaningful interventions.

## Relationships between practitioners and young people are based on: Respect and Reciprocity; they are Relevant and Responsive

- Positive relationships affirm young people’s strengths and coping strategies. Relational practices are based on genuine appreciation of the life the young person has lived.
- Consistent interactions create stability and build strong relationships.
- Reactive responses to crises are problematic unless they are embedded in a longer-term process that directly responds to underlying chronic issues and needs, including the effects of impoverished material circumstances.
- Ecological interventions build relationships across the domains of young people’s lives (such as family, community, education) taking account of the risks and challenges young people face.
- Ecological interventions harness the coping capacities of young people and enhance their support networks to make the most of the resources available (such as facilitating pathways back into education, addressing housing needs, providing access to material resources).

## Time, Trust, Transparency, Thresholds and Transitions

- The quantity and quality of time is important.
- The length of interventions will vary depending on youth need.
- Planning and reflection time is needed to ensure positive encounters with young people and to find possibilities for critical learning moments for young people.
- Time is needed to form trusting relationships.
- Trust is a cornerstone of meaningful practice as is transparency.
- Transparency involves taking the time to ensure that young people understand the why and how of decisions and are involved in decision-making as well as ensuring they are fully informed and involved in planning.
- Time also refers to the importance of predictability, routine and structure. Practitioners can provide 'containment'; a safe environment where opportunities to learn skills for managing issues and space to think differently about the future are provided.
- Threshold and entry criteria often mean that interventions do not happen until after harm has been done. Interventions need to be timely and respond to the unique needs of the young person.
- Transitions for vulnerable young people are another important focus for practitioners as given their challenging circumstances these young people have experienced compressed and accelerated transitions.
- Transitions between services and transitions out of services to independence need careful planning and management to ensure the best outcomes. Transition planning occurs right from the beginning of an intervention rather than something hastily addressed as the young person's discharge looms.

## Honesty, Humility, a Hopeful orientation

- Honesty means that practitioners keep their word, they do what they say they will do, and they tell young people what they are doing. They are honest about their limitations. They keep young people informed of processes and decisions and when difficult decisions have to be made they are honest about this and work this through with the young person.
- Humility recognises that if the practitioner was in the young person's shoes they might well make the same choices as the young person.
- Holding the young person's story and holding their hope and a vision for the future is critical to successful practice. This relationship can be the place where young people gain the confidence to talk about their dreams and where they are supported to access resources and develop the skills needed to realise different futures.

The full report can be found at [www.youthsay.co.nz](http://www.youthsay.co.nz)



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